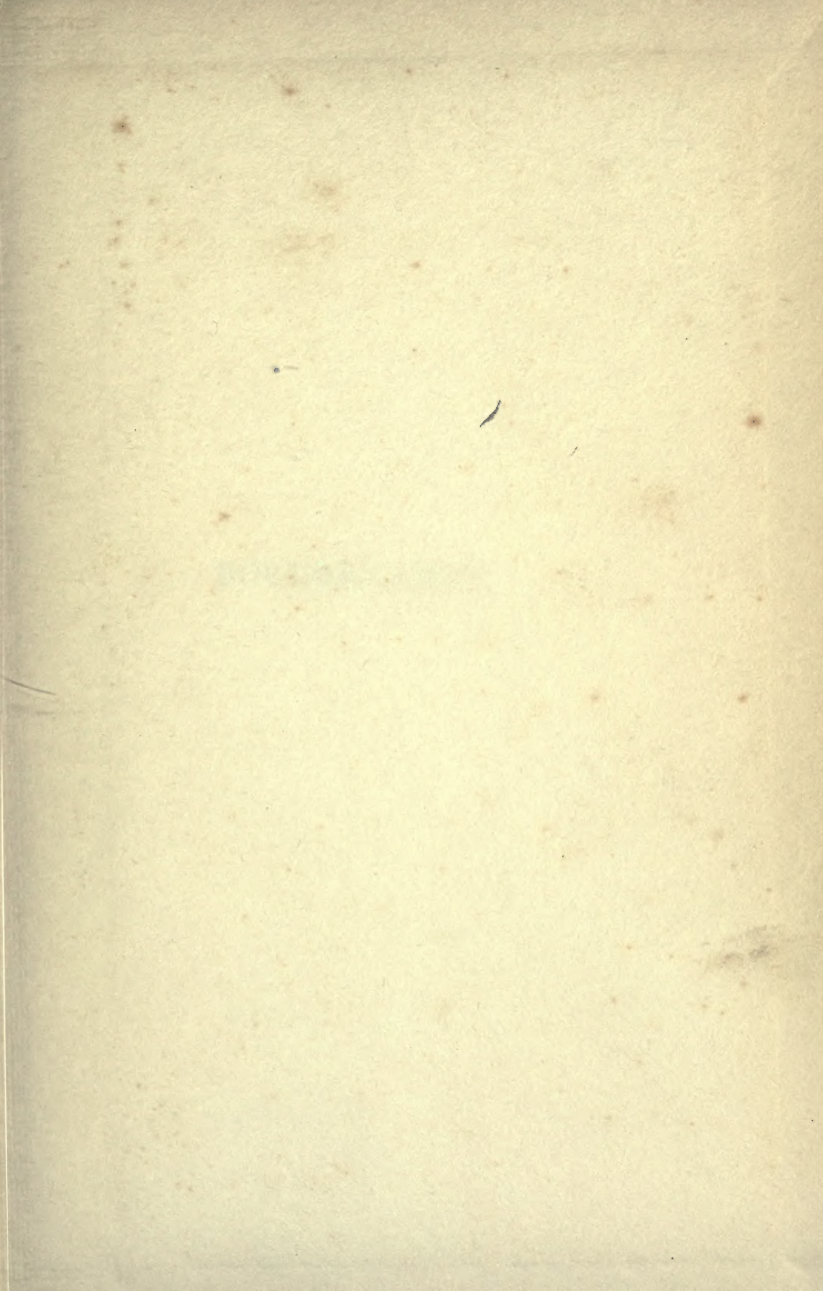


BORDERLANDS

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

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BORDERLANDS

By the Same Writer

DAILY BREAD (1910)

FIRES (1912)

THOROUGHFARES (1914)

BORDERLANDS

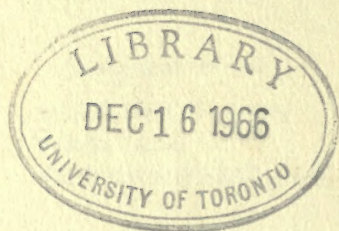
BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON

ELKIN MATHEWS, CORK STREET

M CM XIV



1153538

TO
MY WIFE

*So long had I travelled the lonely road,
Though, now and again, a wayfaring friend
Walked shoulder to shoulder, and lightened the load,
I often would think to myself as I strode,
No comrade will journey with you to the end.*

*And it seemed to me, as the days went past,
And I gossiped with cronies, or brooded alone,
By wayside fires, that my fortune was cast
To sojourn by other men's hearths to the last,
And never to come to my own hearthstone.*

*The lonely road no longer I roam.
We met, and were one in the heart's desire.
Together we came, through the wintry gloam,
To the little old house by the cross-ways, home;
And crossed the threshold, and kindled the fire.*

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THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

SCENE : *The Queen's Crag, a fantastic group of rocks and boulders on the fells. MICHAEL CROZIER, a young hind, lies in the evening glow at the foot of the tallest crag, with a far-away look in his eyes. Presently GEORGE DODD, an old hind, enters and stops on seeing MICHAEL.*

GEORGE. Of all the lazy louts !

It's here, then, that you moon away the evenings,

Stretched like a collie, basking in the sun,

Your noble self for company !

At your age, Michael, lad,

I'd have thought shame to find myself alone,

A night like this :

And such a lass as Peggy, lonesome too.

I wasted little time, when I was young ;

And lost no Summer evenings by myself.

I always was a lad among the lasses,

And not a moony, moping gowk like you.

No sooner was I through,

Than I was washed and out.

Sunlight, moonlight, starlight, dark,

I never missed the screeching of the owls,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Nor listened to it lonesome.

But you, I've never seen you with a lass :

Though Peggy Haliburton, she . . .

Lad, take your pleasure, while you're young,

And Summer nights be fine.

Though youth and Summer nights seem long—

Long enough to last for ever,

For ever and a day,

Before you've looked about a bit,

Old age and Winter are upon you.

To-day you're lithe and lusty,

And to-morrow,

A grizzled, pithless, aching bag-of-bones.

And Peggy Haliburton, too—

The lass was made for love and Summer nights :

Yet she's out walking with herself,

And no one by to see her but the peewits,

Or, maybe, a cock grouse or so—

A bonnie young thing wasting.

*[He pauses, looking at MICHAEL, who pays
little heed, but still lies with a far-away
look in his eyes.]*

But maybe, Michael, you're like me,

And cannot 'bide red hair ?

I never liked a red-haired wench,

If there was any other by.

Red . . . it's the colour of the fox and kestrel,

And stoat and weasel, and such thieves and vermin.

And, as for stock, if I could have my way,

I wouldn't have a red beast on the farm.

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

I'd never let a chestnut stallion whinny
Within a mile of Skarlindyke.
I'd sell all chestnut colts and fillies ;
The red bull, too, should go ;
And no red heifer should come nigh the byres.
I'd have all black, coal-black—
Black stallions and black mares ;
Black bulls, black stirks and heifers—
All black, save tups and ewes :
I'm somehow not so partial to black sheep.
But, in this world, we cannot all be farmers,
And lords of all creation.
Still, even hinds may have their fancies :
And you and I, lad, cannot 'bide red hair :
And so, red Peggy walks alone.
Ay ! and it seems that hinds can hold their tongues,
At least, the youngsters can ;
For my old tongue keeps wagging,
And wags to little purpose seemingly.
It must have lost its sting ;
Or Peggy's not in favour.

[*A pause.*

Well, Mister Mum, you've chosen a snug corner
To stretch your lazy bones in.

[*Sitting down by MICHAEL, with his back
against the rock.*

I think I'll bear you company awhile,
If you can call a hedgehog company,
Tight-curled, and prickles bristling !
Still, though you mayn't be over-lively,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

You're livelier than Myself,
I find him but glum company—
A grumpy, sulky beggar,
Who keeps on telling me I'm getting old,
And 'minding me of happiness gone by.
Myself and I were never fellows,
But ill-yoked at the best of times ;
We seldom pulled together :
And, Lord ! the times that we've upset the cart !
So you must serve to keep the peace between us,
By listening to my chatter.
I'm always happiest, talking,
For then I needn't listen to Myself.
Though I, when I was your age, Michael,
I should have scorned an old man's company,
While any lass . . .
And on Midsummer Eve !

*[He pauses again : then resumes, pointing to a
pillared rock, standing apart from the others.]*

So yon's the tooth, chipped out of the Queen's comb,
When Arthur pitched a rock at her,
While she was combing out her yellow hair,
And he, at his own Crag, a mile away !
It must have been a spanker of a comb,
To bear so brave a tooth !
I wonder what she'd said, to make him pitch it . . .
Though likely she'd said nothing,
But just sat combing out her yellow hair,
And combing, combing, combing.
A woman with a devil in her tongue,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

When she plays mum, is far more aggravating.
Sometimes, when Susan sits and combs her hair
At night like Arthur's Queen,
And combs, and combs,
Till I'm half-mad with watching from the bed,
I only stop Myself,—
The surly chap who wants the light out,—
Just in the nick of time
To loose the pillow from his clutch.
King Arthur must have been a handsome lad,
To chuck a pebble that size near a mile.
But, there were giants in those days :
And he . . .

MICHAEL. A lie !

GEORGE. A lie ? Of course, it's all a lie :
But it's a brave lie, Michael !
I doubt if there was ever King or Queen,
In these outlandish parts.

MICHAEL. There was a Queen,
Though she was not a giant.
She was no bigger than . . .
Than you or me . . .

Or Peggy . . . she was nearer Peggy's height.

GEORGE. You seem to know a deal about her, Michael.
Just Peggy's height ?
And red-haired, too, I'll warrant ?
You've found your tongue :
And got it pat :
And all the gospel truth !
But, how d'you come by so much truth, I wonder ?

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Scarcely by honest means, I doubt.

And how d'you know . . .

MICHAEL. Because I've seen her.

GEORGE. Who?

MICHAEL. The Queen.

GEORGE. You've seen the Queen?

Well, that's a brave one, Michael!

Myself can sometimes tell a little one;

But he was ever but a craven liar.

His were but cheepy bantams barely hatched:

While yours, why, it's a strutting cock, and crowing,

Comb pricked, and hackles quivering!

There's nothing like a big, bold, brazen lie

To warm the blood . . .

MICHAEL. I'm telling truth.

I've seen her twice.

GEORGE. Nay! stop, before you spoil it all.

A lie, blown out too big, will burst.

MICHAEL. It is no lie . . .

I saw the Queen, herself.

GEORGE. You saw her . . . where?

MICHAEL. I saw her here.

GEORGE. Here? In the Crag?

I trust she's not here now,

And listening down behind the rock.

Lord! if she'd heard Myself about the combing!

But queens should be above eavesdropping;

And know the luck of listeners.

Though, how d'you know her, lad, for Arthur's Queen?

Did she sing out:

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

"Hi ! lad, I'm Arthur's Queen !" ?

MICHAEL. She wore a crown . . .

A golden crown . . .

GEORGE. I saw a Queen once, with a golden crown ;
And sitting on a golden throne,
Set high upon a monster golden ball,
Drawn in a golden chariot through the streets
By four-and-twenty little piebald ponies,
At Hexham, on a fair-day, long ago . . .
Ay, long ago, in my young days,
When circuses were circuses.
They made a brave procession through the town,
To draw the folk in after them . . .
Though outside shows are usually the bravest . . .
But not that time . . .
She was a Queen, a black-eyed, gypsy Queen . . .
Black eyes that sparked . . .
And tilted chin . . .
You never saw . . .

MICHAEL. Mine was no circus-queen.
I saw her first, when I was but a boy,
Six years ago, to-day . . . Midsummer Eve . . .
I'd spent the whole day, playing round the Craggs
At kings and castles,
Crowning or killing,
Or conquering myself,
Or putting black-faced bands
Of robber-sheep to rout ;
Or seeking to take, unawares,
Some traitor stoat or weasel

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

That spied on my dominions.
When, ere I knew,
The sky was black,
And broke in flame,
And burst in thunder . . .
And rain, such rain . . .
Lightning, flash on flash . . .
Thunder, brattle after brattle . . .
Rain and rain . . .
You never saw such rain—
One pelting, crashing, teeming, drenching downpour.
Soaked to the skin in no time,
And scared out of my senses,
I crept into a hole among the rocks,
A hole I'd never spied before,
No bigger than a fox's earth.
I had to wriggle on my belly,
To squeeze myself in, head first ;
And half-expecting, every moment,
To feel a vixen's teeth,
Though more I feared the lightning at my heels.
When, all at once, my arms were free :
And, lifting up my head, I found
I'd almost crawled into a chamber,
A big square chamber in the rock,
That I had ne'er heard tell of—
Four blue and shiny walls, that soared
Sheer to the sky . . . a still and starry sky,
Though, in the world without, black storm was raging.
But I'd no eyes for stars,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Nor even wits to wonder at the quiet.
My eyes were on the Queen,
Who sat beside a hearth of burning peats,
Right in the middle of the chamber ;
A golden crown upon her golden head ;
And she was spinning golden wool,
That flickered in the firelight,
Until it seemed that she was spinning flame,
Or her own fire-bright hair.

GEORGE. Red hair ! And she'd red hair . . .
Then, you had only snoozed,
And dreamt of Peggy.
I saw my Queen by daylight.

MICHAEL. Peggy !
I tell you, 'twas the Queen.
I saw her, plainly as I see yon rabbit ;
She wore a furry cloak of weasel skins,
Or something like,
Though round the neck 'twas white—
White as yon rabbit's scut . . .
For it was mortal cold in that stone chamber.

GEORGE. Was anybody with her ?

MICHAEL. I only saw the Queen,
And her, but for a moment.
She lifted up her eyes ;
And I was frightened . . .
And wriggled backwards like an adder,
Till I was in the storm again.
And then, I scuttled home—
A rabbit to its warren—

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Across the splashy heather ;
The lightning playing round my heels,
The thunder rattling round my head,
Though it was not the lightning or the thunder
That scared me now . . .
I'd not a thought for them . . .
My heart was flying from that quiet chamber,
That stone-cold chamber, roofed with quiet stars . . .
And from the eyes . . .
The eyes I had not seen.

GEORGE. And where's this stony chamber, then?

MICHAEL. I never found the way to it again,
Though I've ransacked the Crag for it,
Since I grew big, and bolder.

GEORGE. A vixen in her den,
For she'd be red enough.
Yet, you'd have felt her teeth for certain !
It must have been a dream.

MICHAEL. I might have thought so, too,
Had I not seen the Queen, again.

GEORGE. Again ?
I saw my Queen, again, too.
But what was your Queen's name ?

MICHAEL. Queen Guenevere.

GEORGE. Mine had a braver name—
They called her Donna Bella di Braganza,
Castilian Queen of the Equestrian World.
I spelled it out upon the rainbow bills
The clown, who wagged the tail of the procession,
Was scattering from his donkey-cart.

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

I saw my Queen, again . . .
My gypsy Queen !
My black-haired, black-eyed gypsy . . .
You, and your red-haired Queens !
I'd give a world of red-haired Gueneveres,
To see those gypsy eyes again . . .

[*A pause.*

I smell the sawdust now . . . and oranges . . .
'Twas in the tent . . .
She'd doffed her robes and crown . . .
I knew her by the flashing of her eyes,
Tripping nimbly into the ring,
So brave in yellow silk, skin-fitting silk,
Yellow as dandelions,
And sprinkled all with spangles ;
And yellow ribbons in her hair,
Her jet-black hair that hung about her shoulders.
I see her tripping now into the ring,
With flashing eyes and teeth,
Clean-limbed, and mettlesome as the coal-black mare,
Coal-black from mane to fetlocks—
That pawed and champ'd to greet her . . .
And there's naught bonnier than a bonnie mare . . .
She clapped its glossy neck :
It nuzzled her :
Then ere I knew,
She'd 'lighted on its flanks,
Nimble and springy as a thistle-down :
And they were racing round the ring together,
She, standing tip-toe,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And with ne'er a rein,
A straw between her teeth,
Her flashing teeth . . .
And tilted chin . . .
And flashing eyes . . .
Her beautiful long hair, as black and silky,
As black and silky as the mare's long mane
Was streaming out behind . . .
And ribbons streaming . . .
Spangles sparkling . . .
Sawdust flying,
Whips a-cracking,
Music playing . . .
And now, she sprang
Through flaming hoops,
And my heart, through the fire with her,
And lighted on the steamy flanks :
And on, and on,
And round and round the ring,
Till I was dazzled dizzy,
And out of breath, but watching her.
And what with crack of whips . . .
Thudding thresh of hoofs . . .
Smell of spirting sawdust . . .
Crash of drums and trumpets . . .
Flaming hoops of fire . . .
Flying hair . . .
Yellow ribbons . . .
Flashing teeth . . .
And flashing eyes . . .

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

My blood was mad, was mad for her,
I wanted to be flying round,
For ever flying round with her,
For ever, and for ever . . .
I wanted her
As I have never wanted woman,
Before or since . . .

[*A pause.*]

And yet, I've little doubt
That she'd have been a poor hand with the porridge,
And poorer at the milking ;
Though she could manage horses ;
And, maybe, 'twas as well
That I walked home that night with Susan.
Within nine months, we'd wedded.
There's naught amiss with Susan's porridge,
And she could milk a stone.
She's been a good and careful wife enough ;
She never spares herself . . . nor me ;
Though, I dare say, I'm even more a trial
To her, than to myself.
And though I'm often harking back,
And sometimes hanker . . .
Somehow, I cannot see the Donna Bella,
In yellow skin-tights, cleaning out the byre !
And yet !

MICHAEL. I saw Queen Guenevere, again,
Three years ago, upon Midsummer Eve.
She sat upon a little hill, and sang :
And combed her long red hair, beside the lough—

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Just sitting like a leveret in the sun
To sleek its fur—
And all about her, grey snipe darted, drumming.
She combed her long red hair
That tumbled down her shoulders,
Her long hair, red as bracken,
As bracken in October ;
And with a gleam of wind in it,
A light of running water.
Her crown was in the heather, at her feet :
And now and then, a snipe would perch upon it ;
And with his long neb preen his gleaming feathers,
As if to mock the Queen,
Queen Guenevere, a-combing her long hair
That tumbled over a gown of blue . . .
As blue and shimmery as a mallard's neck . . .
And with a light of running water :
And, as she sang, 'twas like the curlew calling,
And rippled through my heart like curlew calling,
Like curlew calling in the month of April,
And with a clear cool noise of running water.
I dropped upon my belly in the bracken :
And lay and watched her, combing her red hair :
And hearkened to her singing . . .
And I was sorry, when she'd done, at last,
And took her long red hair, and twisted it,
And fixed it with a golden pin.
Though she'd but little need of crown,
Whose hair was golden crown enough,
She stooped to take her gold crown from the heather

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And set it on her brow :
Then stood upright,
Stood like a birch-tree in the wind,
A silver birch-tree in the sunset wind
That ripples through its leaves like running water ;
The little snipe about her drumming . . .
And then, I looked into her eyes,
Looked into golden pools,
Pools, golden 'neath October bracken . . .
And into the heart of fire . . .

[*A pause.*

A shrew's cold muzzle touched my hand,
Among the bracken, startling me . . .
And she was gone . . .

GEORGE (*after a pause*). And so, the leveret bolted !
You never saw her more ?

So all tales end . . .

At least, the true tales told by life itself.
Though I . . . I saw my Queen again . . .
Yet . . . with a difference . . .

'Twas at the next fair after I was married.
I thought I'd like a glimpse of her once more :
Although I'd much ado, persuading Susan :
She'd never been inside a circus,
And thought it sorry waste of silver.
But, once inside the tent,
She liked it well enough :
And gaped and grinned her money's worth.
And I . . . I sat, and waited,
And waited for my gypsy . . .

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And snuffed the smell of sawdust . . .
While Susan giggled at the clown—
A yellow-legged old corncrake—
And nudged me with her elbow,
And asked me if I'd ever heard the like ;
But I'd no ears nor eyes
For any save my gypsy . . .
And she . . . she never came.
Another woman rode the coal-black mare—
A red-haired jumping-jenny—
And there were cracking whips . . .
And sawdust flying . . .
Drums and trumpets . . .
Flaming hoops . . .
And all the razzle-dazzle . . .
But not my black-eyed gypsy.
And I sat, waiting still, when all was over,
Until the tent was empty . . .
Sat waiting for the Donna Bella . . .
Till Susan tugged me by the jacket,
And asked if I'd sit gaping there all night.
She got me out, at last—
And then . . . I met her . . .
Met her, face to face,
My gypsy Queen !
But, oh ! . . . how changed . . .
Except her eyes . . .
I knew her by her eyes :
For they still flashed and sparkled,
Though she was bent and hunched,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And hobbled with a crutch.
She'd had a tumble, since I'd seen her flying
Around the ring, as light as thistle-down.
She clutched me with a skinny hand,
Wanting to tell my fortune :
But Susan wouldn't let her :
She said, a married man had got his fortune,
So needn't waste his earnings.
The gypsy bit the straw between her teeth,
Her flashing teeth ;
And, tilting her proud chin,
She laughed at that, with merry eyes
Twinkling 'neath her yellow kerchief—
Dandelion yellow—
Bound about her jet-black hair,
The hair that I'd seen flying free . . .
And when she laughed,
And looked into my eyes . . .
The heather was afire . . .
I could have caught her to me,
There and then . . .
Whipped her up, and run with her
To the world's end, and over . . .
But, Susan . . . dragging on my arm . . .
Ay ! broken as she was,
And hunched and hobbling,
I would have wedded her outright,
Had it not been for Susan . . .
I lost her in the crowd . . .
And never saw her more . . .

[*Pause.*]

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And so, went home to decent porridge :
And 'twas as well, maybe.
A man must have his meat, if he's to work,
And victuals count for much.
And Susan's ever been a careful wife,
And had no easy time of it.

[*Pause.*

But love's a queer thing, Michael.
It comes to you . . . like that !

[*Striking his hands together.*

I've known a man walk seven miles each night
To see a woman's shadow on the blind.
And, in the end,
It's one, and one alone, that holds you,
Be't Donna Bella, Guenevere, or Peggy.

[*Pause.*

But you . . . you never saw your carrotty Queen,
Combing her long red hair again, I'll warrant.

MICHAEL (*slowly, as in a trance*). I saw her once,
upon Midsummer Eve,

Six years ago . . .

I saw her, twice, upon Midsummer Eve,

Three years ago . . .

I'll see her thrice . . .

GEORGE. And it's Midsummer Eve !

MICHAEL (*listening*). And nigh the hour . . .
And hark, the snipe a-drumming !

GEORGE. You cannot think . . .

It's all a pack of lies . . .

Or else, you're daft, clean daft !

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Your eyes are queer and wild . . .

You do not see her now?

No! No! I thought not!

It's all stuff and nonsense,

Your silly tale about a red-haired Queen,

Who's been dead dust a thousand years, or more.

MICHAEL (*leaping to his feet*). She's coming . . .
coming now . . .

GEORGE (*leaping up too, and gripping Michael's arm*).
No! No!

You're crazy, surely . . .

Yet . . . queer things happen on the fells, at times . . .

And on Midsummer Eve. . .

MICHAEL (*listening more intently*). She's drawing
slowly nearer . .

I hear her silks a-rustling through the grass. . .

GEORGE (*listening too*). I seem to hear . . .

What are you gaping at?

MICHAEL (*looking up*). The Queen! The Queen!

[*They both stand, spellbound, gazing at a woman
standing on the crest of a boulder, burning
like a golden flame in the last rays of the
setting sun. Presently, looking down, and
seeing them, she laughs.*]

GEORGE (*shaking himself, while Michael still stands
spellbound*). It's Peggy Haliburton, after all!

(*To Peggy*.) Why, Michael said 'twas Arthur's Queen.

He called her some outlandish name;

And said, she'd long red foxy hair,

And eyes like pools;

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And sang just like the curlew.
But he'll be telling you himself :
For, all along, I knew 'twas you he meant.
Men's tongues wag madly on Midsummer Eve :
And I've been talking, too,
A pack of nonsense,
As Michael, here, could tell you,
If he'd not too much sense to heed
An old man's witless blathering.
Well, I had best be going,
And getting home to Susan.
She doesn't hold with owls, and such like.

1912.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Bloodybush Edge is a remote spot on the border-line between England and Scotland, marked by a dumpy obelisk, on which is inscribed an old scale of tolls. A rough sandy road runs down across the dark moors into England on the one hand, and into Scotland on the other. It is a fine, starry night in early September. Daft Dick, a fantastic figure, in appearance half-gamekeeper, half-tramp (dressed as he is in cast-off clothes of country-gentlemen) swings up the road from the Scottish side, singing.

“Now Liddisdale has ridden a raid ;
But I wat they better hae stayed at hame ;
For Michael o’ Winfield, he lies dead !
And Jock o’ the Side is prisoner ta’en.”

[*He stands for a moment, looking across the fells, which are very dark, in spite of the starry sky ; then flings himself down in the heather, with his back to the obelisk, and lights his pipe. Presently, he sees a dark figure, stumbling with uncertain steps across the boggy moor ; and watches it keenly as it approaches, until it reaches the road, when he sees that it is a strange man, evidently a tramp.*

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP. A track at last, thank God !

DICK. Ay, there be whiles
When beaten tracks are welcome.

TRAMP. Who the . . . Oh !
I didn't count on having company
Again in this world : and when I heard a voice
I thought it must be another ghost. It's queer
Hearing a voice bleat when you haven't heard
A mortal voice for ages. I've not changed
A word with a soul since noon ; and when you spoke
It gave me quite a turn. A feather, Lord !
But it wouldn't take the shadow of a feather
To knock me over. I'm in such a stickle,
Dead-beat, and fit to drop. To drop ! I've dropped
A hundred times already, humpty-dumpty ;
Why, I've been tumbling in and out black holes,
Since sunset on that god-forsaken moor,
Half-crazed with fear of . . . Ah, you've got a light ;
And I've been tramping all the livelong day
With a pipeful of comfort in my waistcoat pocket,
And would have swopt the frizzling sun itself
For a match to kindle it. Thanks, mate, that's better.
And now, what was it you were saying, Old Cock,
When I mistook you then for Hamlet's father ?
Lord ! if you'd seen him at the " Elephant,"
In queer, blue sheeny armour, you'd have shivered.
" I am thy father's spirit," he says, like that,
Down in his boots. But you were saying——

DICK. There are times
When beaten tracks are welcome.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP.

True for you :

And truer by a score of bumps, for me.
My neck's been broken half-a-dozen times ;
My body's just an aching bag of bones.
I'm one big bruise from top to toe, as though
I'd played in the Cup final, as the ball.
And mud, I'm mud to the eyes, and over, carrying
Half of the country that I've passed through on me.
My best suit, too ! And I was always faddy
About my clothes. My mother used to call me
Finicky Fred. If she could see me now !
I couldn't count the times that I've pitched headlong
Into black bog.

DICK.

Ay, there are clarty bits

In Foulmire Moss. But what set you stravaging
Among the peat-hags at this time of night ?
Unless you know the tracks by heart. . .

TRAMP.

I know

The Old Kent Road by heart.

DICK.

The Old Kent Road ?

TRAMP. London, S.E. You've heard of London likely.

DICK. Ay ! ay ! I've heard. . . .

TRAMP. Well, mate, I've walked from London.

DICK. You've walked from London, here ?

TRAMP.

Well, not to-day.

It must be nigh three hundred mile, I reckon—

Just five weeks, yesterday, since I set out.

But, as you say, I've walked from London, here ;

Though where " here " is, the devil only knows.

What is " here " called, if it has any name

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

But Back o' Beyond, or World's End, eh?

DICK.

You're sitting

On Bloodybush Edge this moment.

TRAMP.

To think of that !

Bloodybush Edge! And that's what I have come to!

And all my friends, the men and women I know,

Are strolling up and down the Old Kent Road,

Chattering and laughing by the lighted stalls

And the barrows of bananas and oranges,

Or sitting snugly in bars ; while here am I,

On Bloodybush Edge, talking to Hamlet's father.

DICK. My name's Dick Dodd.

TRAMP.

Well, no offence, Old Cock !

And Hamlet's father was a gentleman,

A king of ghosts ; and Lord ! but he could groan.

My name's . . . Jack Smith; and Jack would give a sovereign,

A sovereign down, if he could borrow it,

And drinks all round, and here's to you, and you !

Just to be sitting in The Seven Stars,

And listening to the jabber, just to snuff

A whiff of the smoke and spirit. Seven Stars!

I'm lodging under stars enough to-night ;

Seven times seven hundred. . .

DICK.

Often I have tried

To count them, lying here upon my back ;

But they're too many for me. Just when you think

You've reckoned all between two sprigs of heather,

One tumbles from its place, or else a hundred

Spring out of nowhere. If you only stare

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Hard at the darkest patch, for long enough,
You'll see that it's all alive with little stars ;
And there isn't any dark at all,

TRAMP.

No dark !

If you'd been tumbling into those black holes,
You'd not think overmuch of these same stars.
I couldn't see my hand before me. Stars !
Give me the lamps along the Old Kent Road ;
And I'm content to leave the stars to you.
They're well enough ; but hung a trifle high
For walking with clean boots. Now a lamp or so . . .

DICK. If it's so fine and brave, the Old Kent Road,
How is it you came to leave it ?

TRAMP.

I'd my reasons.

DICK. Reasons ! Queer reasons surely to set you
trapesing

Over Foulmire in the dark : though I could travel
The fells from here to Cheviot, blindfold. Ay !
And never come a cropper.

TRAMP.

'Twas my luck,

My lovely luck, and naught to do with reasons—
My gaudy luck, and the devilish dust and heat,
And hell's own thirst that drove me ; and too snug
A bed among the heather. Oversleeping,
That's always played the mischief with me. Once
I slept till three in the morning, and . . .

DICK.

Till three ?

You're an early bird, if you call that oversleeping.
Folk hereabouts are mostly astir by three :
But, city folk, I thought . . .

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP. I'm on the night-shift.
I sleep by day, for the most part, like a cat.
That's why, though dog-tired now, I couldn't sleep
A wink though you paid me gold down.

DICK. Night-shift, you !
And what may your job be ? Cat's night-shift, likely,
As well as day's sleep !

TRAMP. Now, look here, Old Cock,
There's just one little thing that we could teach you
Down London way. Why, even babes in London
Know better than to ask too many questions.
You ask no questions, and you'll hear no lies,
Is the first lesson that's hammered into them.
No London gentleman asks questions. Lord !
If you went " What's-your-job ? " -ing down our way,
You'd soon be smelling someone's fist, I reckon ;
Or tripping over somebody in the dark
Upon the stairs : and with a broken neck
Be left, still asking questions in your coffin,
Till the worms had satisfied you. Not that I
Have anything to hide, myself. I'm only
Advising you for your own good. But, Old Chap,
We were talking of something else . . . that hell-hot road.
I'd pegged along it through the blazing dust
From Bellingham, till I could peg no more ;
My mouth was just a limekiln, and each foot,
One bleeding blister. A kipper on the grid,
That's what I was on the road. And the heather looked
So cool and cosy, I left the road for a bit :
And coming on a patch of wet green moss,

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

I took my boots off ; and it was so champion
To feel cold water squelching between my toes,
I paddled on like a child, till I came to a clump
Of heather in full bloom, just reeking honey ;
And curled up in it, and dropt sound asleep ;
And, when I awakened, it was dark, pitch-dark,
For all your stars. The sky was light enough,
Had I been travelling that way. But, for the road,
I hadn't a notion of its whereabouts.
A blessed babe-in-the-woods I was, clean lost,
And fit to cry for my mammy. Babes-in-the-wood !
But there were two of them, for company,
And only one of me, by my lone self.
However, I said to myself : You've got to spend
A night in the heather. Well, you've known worse
beds,
And worse bed-fellows than a sheep or so—
Trying to make believe I wasn't frightened.
And then, somehow, I couldn't, God knows why !
But I was scared : the loneliness and all ;
The quietness, and the queer creepy noises ;
And something that I couldn't put a name to,
A kind of feeling in my marrow bones,
As though the great black hills against the sky
Had come alive about me in the night,
And they were watching me ; as though I stood
Naked, in a big room, with blind men sitting,
Unseen, all round me, in the quiet darkness,
That was not dark to them. And all the stars
Were eyeing me ; and whisperings in the heather

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Were like cold water trickling down my spine :
And when I heard a cough . . .

DICK. A coughing sheep.

TRAMP. May be : but 'twas a coughing ghost to me.
I've never yet set eyes on a ghost, unless . . .

[looking askance at Dick]

Though I've often felt them near me. Once when I . . .
But, Lord, I'm talking, talking . . .

DICK. I've seen ghosts,
A hundred times. The ghosts of reivers ride
The fells at night ; and you'd have ghosts in plenty
About you, lad, though you were blind to them.
But why d'you fear them ? There's no harm in ghosts.
Even should they ride over you, it's only
Like a cold wind blowing through you. The other night
As I came down by Girsonsfield, the ghost
Of Parcy Reed, with neither hands nor feet
Rode clean through me ; the false Halls and the Croziers
Hard on his heels, though I kept clear of them ;
And often I've heard him, cracking his hunting-crop
On a winter's night, when the winds were in full cry ;
And heard the yelp of the pack, and the horn's halloo,
Over the howl of the storm, or caught at dawn
A glimpse of the tails of his green hunting-jacket.
Whenever you shudder, or break in a cold sweat,
Not knowing why, folk say that someone's stepping
Over your grave ; but that's all stuff and nonsense.
It's only some poor ghost that's walking through you.

TRAMP. Well, ghosts or sheep, I'd had my fill of
them ;

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Went all to pieces, took to my heels and ran ;
And hadn't run three yards, when I pitched headlong.
That was the first. Since then, I've felt the bottom
Of every hole, five hundred to my reckoning,
From there to here.

DICK. You've covered some rough ground.
You must have doubled back upon your tracks,
If you were making North.

TRAMP. Ay : I was making
For Scotland. I'd a notion . . .

DICK. Scotland lies
Under your left heel, though your right's in England.

TRAMP. To think of that ! Well, I can't feel much
difference
'Twixt one and the other. Perhaps, if I'd my boots
off . . .

But, Hamlet's father, isn't it a king's bed
We're lying on, and sprawling over two countries !
And yet, I'd rather be in Millicent Place,
London, S.E., and sleeping three in a bed.
This room's too big for me, too wide and windy ;
The bed, too broad, and not what I call snug ;
The ceiling, far too high, and full of eyes.
I hate the loneliness. I like to feel
There are houses, packed with people, all about me
For miles on miles ; I'm fond of company ;
I'm only really happy in a throng—
Crowds jostling thick and hot about me. Here
I feel, somehow, as if I were walking naked
Among the hills, the last man left alive.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

I haven't so much as set eyes on a house,
Not since I left that blistering road.

DICK.

The nearest

Is three miles off, or more.

TRAMP.

Well, country-people

Should be good neighbours, and quiet ; but, for me,
I'd rather be packed like herrings in a barrel.

I hate the loneliness ; it makes me think.

I'm fond of company ; too fond at times.

If I hadn't been so fond of company

A while back, I'd hardly have been lying now

On Bloodybush Edge, talking of ghosts at midnight,
When I might be . . . but it won't bear thinking on.

Yet, even with you beside me, Bloodybush Edge

Is a size too big in beds—leaves too much room

For ghosts, to suit my fancy. Three in a bed,

And you sleep sound.

DICK.

And why should you fear ghosts,

When, one fine night, you'll be a ghost yourself?

How soon who knows ! Why, even at this moment,

If you had broken your neck among the moss-hags,

You'd be your own ghost sitting there, not you.

If you hadn't been so muddy and so frightened . . .

Nay ; but I've seen too many ghosts in my time

For you to take me in. Ghosts often lean

Over me, when I'm fishing in the moonlight.

They're keen, are ghosts. I sometimes feel their breath

Blow cold upon my neck, when guddling trout ;

Or the clutch of their clammy fingers on my wrist

When spearing salmon, lest I bungle and miss.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

And always at the burning of the water
You'll see them lurking in the shadows, beyond
The flare and the smoke of the torches, in the night,
Eager as boys to join in the sport ; and at times,
When they have pressed too near, and a torch has flared,
I've seen the live flame running through their bodies.
But oftenest they appear to me when alone
I'm fishing like a heron ; and last night
As I stooped over Deadwater, I felt . . .

TRAMP. And you're an honest man to be asking questions
Of gentlemen on tour ! So you're a poacher,
A common poacher : though it must be rare sport,
I've often fancied . . .

DICK. To creep up to a pool
Where a big bull-trout lies beneath a boulder
With nose against the stream, his tail scarce flicking ;
To creep up quiet and without a shadow,
And lie upon your belly in the gravel ;
And slide your hands as noiseless as an otter
Into the water, icy-cold and aching,
And tickle, tickle, till you have him fuddled ;
Then lift him cold and slithery from the burn,
A quivering bit of silver in the moonlight . . .

TRAMP. Ay, that must be rare sport ; but for myself,
I'd rather manage without the help of ghosts.
Once, I remember, I was bending down—
'Twas in an empty house . . . I'd cut my thumb,
The window jamming somehow, a nasty cut :
The mark's still there . . . (not that ! nay, that's the place
I was bitten by a friend) and as I fumbled

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

With a damned tricky lock, some Yankee patent,
I felt a ghost was standing close behind me ;
And dared not stir, or squint over my shoulder :
But crouched there, moving neither hand nor foot,
Till I was just a solid ache of terror,
And could have squealed aloud with the numb cramp,
And pins and needles in my arms and legs.
And then at last, when I was almost dropping,
I lost my head, took to my heels, and bolted
Headfirst downstairs, and through the broken window,
Leaving my kit and the swag, without a thought :
And never coming to my senses, till
I saw a bullseye glimmering down the lane.
And then I found my forehead bleeding, too—
At first I thought 'twas sweat—a three-inch cut,
Clean to the bone. I had to have it stitched.
I told the doctor that I'd put my head
Through a window in the dark, but not a word
About my body following it. The doctor,
He was a gentleman, and asked no questions.
A civil chap : he'd stitched my scalp before
Once, when the heel of a lady's slipper . . .

DICK.

So you

Are a common poacher, too ; although you take
Only dead silver and gold. Still, it must be
A risky business, burgling, when the folk . . .

TRAMP. Risk ! ay, there's risk ! That's where the fun
comes in :

To steal into a house, with people sleeping
So warm and snug and innocent overhead ;

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

To hear them snoring as you pass their doors
With all they're dreaming of stowed in your pockets ;
To tiptoe from the attic to the basement,
With a chance that you may find on any landing
A door flung open, and a man to tackle.
It's only empty houses I'm afraid of.
I've more than once looked up a pistol's snout,
And never turned a hair . . . though once I heard
A telephone-bell ring in an empty house—
And I can hear the damned thing tinkling yet . . .
I'm all in a cold sweat just thinking of it.
It tinkled, tinkled . . . Risk ! Why, man alive,
Life's all a risky business, till you're dead.
There's no risk then . . . unless . . . I never feared
A living man, sleeping or waking, yet.
But ghosts, well, ghosts are different somehow. There's
A world of difference between men and ghosts.
Let's think no more of ghosts—but lighted streets,
And crowds, and women ; though it's my belief
There's not a woman in all this country-side.

DICK. There's womenfolk, and plenty. And they
are kind,

The womenfolk, to me. Daft Dick is ever
A favourite with the womenfolk. His belly
Would oft go empty, were it not for them.

TRAMP. You call those women, gawky, rawboned
creatures,
Thin-lipped, hard-jawed, cold-eyed ! I like fat women.
If you could walk just now down the Old Kent Road,
And see the plump young girls in furs and feathers,

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

With saucy black eyes sparkling in the gaslight ;
And looking at you, munching oranges,
Or whispering to each other with shrill giggles
As you go by, and nudging one another ;
Or standing with a soldier eating winkles,
Grimacing with the vinegar and pepper,
Then laughing so merrily you almost wish
You were a red-coat, too ! And the fat old mothers,
Too old for feathers and follies, with their tight
Nigh-bursting bodices, and their double chins,
They're homely, motherly and comfortable,
And do a man's eyes good. There's not a sight
In all the world that's half so rare to see
As a fat old wife with jellied eels and porter.
Ay, women should be plump . . . though Ellen Ann
Was neither old nor fat, when she and I
Were walking out together, and she'd red hair,
As red as blazes, and a peaked white face.
But 'twas her eyes, her eyes that always laughed,
And the merry way she had with her . . . But, Lord,
I'm talking ! Only mention petticoats,
And I'm the boy to talk till doomsday. Women !
If it hadn't been for a petticoat, this moment
I might be drinking my own health in the bar
Of The Seven Stars or The World Turned Upside
Down,
Instead of . . . Well, Old Cock, it's good to have
Someone to talk to, after such a day.
You cannot get much further with a sheep ;
And I met none but sheep, and they all scuttled,

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Not even stopping to pass the time of day,
And the birds, well, they'd enough to say, and more,
When I was running away from myself in the dark,
With their "Go back! Go back!"

DICK. You'd scared the grouse.

They talk like Christians. Often in the dawn . . .

TRAMP. Bloodybush Edge! But why the Bloody-
bush?

I see no bush . . .

DICK. Some fight in the old days, likely,

In the days when men were men . . .

TRAMP. I little thought,

When I set out from London on my travels,
That I was making straight for Bloodybush Edge.
I had my reasons, but, reason or none, it's certain
That I'd have turned up here, someday or other:
For I must travel. I've the itching foot.
I talk of London, when I'm well out of it
By a hundred miles or so; but, when I'm in it,
There always comes a time when I couldn't stay
A moment longer, not for love or money:
Though in the end it always has me back.
I cannot rest. There's something in my bones—
They'll need to screw the lid down with brass screws
To keep them in my coffin. When I'm dead,
If I don't walk, I'll be surprised, I . . . Lord,
We're on to ghosts again! But I'm the sort
That's always hankering to be elsewhere,
Wherever I am. Some men can stick to a job
As though they liked it. I'm not made that way.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

I couldn't heave the same pick two days running.
I've tried it : and I know. I must have change.
It's in my blood. And work, why, work's for fools.

DICK. Ay, fools indeed : and yet they seem content.
Content ! why my old uncle, Richard Dodd,
He worked till he was naught but skin and bone,
And rheumatism : and when the doctor told him :
"You must give up. It's no use ; you're past work."
"Past work," he says, "past work, like an old horse :
"They shoot old nags, when they are past their work.
"Doctor," he says, "I'll give you five pound down
"To take that gun, and shoot me like a nag."
The doctor only laughed, and answered, "Nay,
"An old nag's carcase is worth money, Richard :
"But yours, why, who'd give anything for yours !"
They call me daft—Daft Dick. It pleases them.
But I have never been daft enough to work.
I never did a hand's turn in my life :
And won't, while there are trout-streams left, and
women.

And I am a traveller, too, I cannot rest.
The wind's in my bones, I think, and like the wind,
I'm here, to-night ; to-morrow, Lord knows where !

TRAMP. London, perhaps, or well upon the road
there,
Since I'm on Bloodybush Edge.

DICK. Nay, never London.
I cannot thole the towns. They stifle me.
I spent a black day in Newcastle, once.
Never again ! I cannot abide the crowds.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

I must be by myself. I must have air :
I must have room to breathe, and elbow-room,
Wide spaces round me, winds and running water.
I know the singing-note of every burn
'Twixt here and High Cup Nick, by Appleby.
And birds and beasts, I must have them about me.
Rabbits and hares, weasels and stoats and adders,
Plover and grouse, partridge and snipe and curlew,
Red-shank and heron. I think that towns would choke
me ;

And I'd go blind shut in by the tall houses,
With never a far sight to stretch my eyes.
I must have hills, and hills beyond. And beds—
I never held with beds and stuffiness.
I'm seldom at my ease beneath a roof :
The rafters all seem crushing on my head,
A dead weight. Though I sleep in barns in Winter,
I'm never at home except beneath the stars.
I've seen enough of towns ; and as for the women,
Fat blowsy sluts and slatterns . . .

TRAMP.

Easy, Old Cock !

"What's one man's meat . . ." as the saying is ; and so,
Each man to his own world, and his own women.

[*They sit for awhile smoking in silence. Then Daft
Dick begins singing softly to himself again.*]

DICK (*singing*). "Their horses were the wrong way
shod,

And Hobbie has mounted his grey sae fine,
Wat on his old horse, Jock on his bay ;
And on they rode for the waters of Tyne.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

“ And when they came to Chollerton Ford,
They lighted down by the light o’ the moon ;
And a tree they cut with nogs on each side,
To climb up the wa’ of Newcastle toun.”

TRAMP. What’s that you’re singing, matey ?

DICK. “ Jock o’ the Side.”

A ballad of the days when men were men,
And sheep were sheep, and not all mixer-maxter.
Thon were brave days, or brave nights, rather, thon !
Brave nights, when Liddisdale was Liddisdale,
And Tynedale, Tynedale, not all hand-in-glove,
And hanky-panky, and naught but market-haggling
’Twixt men whose fathers’ swords were the bargainers !
That was a man’s work riding out, hot-trod,
Over the hills to lift a herd of cattle,
And leave behind a blazing byre, or to steal
Your neighbour’s sheep, while he lay drunk and
snoring—

A man’s work, ever bringing a man’s wages,
The fight to the death, or life won at the sword’s
point.

God ! those were nights : the heather and sky alow
With the light of burning peel-towers, and the wind
Ringing with slogans, as the dalesmen met,
Over the singing of the swords :

“ An Armstrong ! An Armstrong ! ”

“ A Milburne ! A Milburne ! ”

“ An Elliott ! An Elliott ! ”

“ A Robson ! A Robson ! ”

“ A Charlton ! A Charlton ! ”

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

“A Fenwick ! A Fenwick !”

“Fy, Tynedale, to it !”

“Jethert’s here ! Jethert’s here !”

“Tarsset and Tarretburn !

“Hardy and heatherbred !

“Yet ! Yet !”

Man, did you ever hear the story told
Of Barty Milburne, Barty of the Comb,
Down Tarsset way ? and how he waked one morning
To find that overnight some Scottish reiver
Had lifted the pick of his flock : and how hot-foot
He was up the Blackburn, summoning Corbet Jock :
And how the two set out to track the thieves
By Emblehope, Berrymoor Edge and Blackman’s Law,
By Blakehope Nick, and under Oh Me Edge,
And over Girdle Fell to Chattlehope Spout,
And so to Carter Bar ; but lost the trail
Somewhere about the Reidswire ; and how, being loth
To go home empty-handed, they just lifted
The best sheep grazing on the Scottish side,
As fair exchange, and turned their faces home.
By this, snow had set in ; and ’twas sore work
Driving the wethers against it over the fell ;
When, finding they were followed in their turn
By the laird of Leatham and his son, they laughed,
And waited for the Scots by Chattlehope Spout
Above Catcleugh ; and in the snow they fought,
Till Corbet Jock and one of the Scots were killed,
And Barty himself sore wounded in the thigh ;
When the other Scot, thinking him good as dead,

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Sprang on him, as he stooped, with a whickering
laugh ;

And Barty, with one clean, back-handed blow,
Struck off his head, and, as they tell the tale,
“Garred it spang like an onion along the heather.”
Then, picking up the body of Corbet Jock,
He slung it over his shoulder ; and carried his mate
With wounded thigh, and driving the wethers before
him

‘Through blinding snow, across the boggy fells
To the Blackburn, though his boot was filled with blood.
Or the other tale, how one of the Robson lads
Stole a Scot’s ewes ; and when he’d got them home,
And mixed them with his own, found out, too late,
They’d got the scab : and how he went straight back
With a stout hempen rope to the Scot’s house,
And hanged him from his own roof-tree by the neck
Till he was dead, to teach the rascal a lesson,
Or so he said, that when a gentleman called
For sheep the next time, he’d think twice about it
Before he tried to palm off scabbit ewes.
Poachers and housebreakers and bargainers !
Those men were men : and lived and died like men ;
Taking their own road—asking no man’s leave ;
Doing and speaking outright, hot and clean,
The thing that burned in them, and paying the price.
And those same gawky, rawboned women mothered
Such sons as these ; and still do, nowadays—
For hunting foxes, and for market-haggling !
You fear no living man ! A glinting bullseye

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Down a dark lane would not have sent them scuttling.
They didn't dread the mosshags in the dark,
And seemingly they'd little fear of ghosts,
Being themselves so free in making ghosts.
Ghosts ! why the night is all alive with ghosts,
Ghosts of dead raiders, and dead cattle-lifters ;
Poor, headless ghosts ; and ghosts with broken
 necks . . .

See that chap, yonder, with the bleeding thigh,
On a grey gelding, making for Hucklewinter—
A horse-thief, sure . . . And the ghostly stallions
 whinny

As the ghostly reivers drive their flocks and herds . . .

[Listening.]

They are quiet now : but I've often heard the patter
Of sheep, or the trot-trot of the frightened stirks
Down this same road . . .

TRAMP. Stop, man ! You'll drive me crazy !
Let's talk no more of ghosts ! I want to sleep.
I'm dog-tired . . . but I'll never sleep to-night.
What's that . . . I thought I heard . . . I'm all a-
tremble.

My very blood stops, listening, in my veins.
I'm all to fiddlestrings . . . Let's talk of London,
And lights, and crowds, and women. Once I met
A chap in the bar of The World Turned Upside Down,
With three blue snakes tattooed around his wrist :
A joker, he was ; and what he didn't know
Of women the world over you could shove
Between the nail and the quick, and never feel it.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

He told me that in Valparaiso once
A half-breed wench that he . . . but, Lord, what's that !
[*A low distant sound of trotting drawing quickly nearer.*
I thought I heard . . . Do you hear nothing ?

DICK. Naught.

TRAMP. I'm all on edge ; I could have sworn I
heard—

Where was I ? Well, as I was saying . . . God !
Can you hear nothing now ? Trot-trot ! Trot-trot !
I must be going crazed, or you're stone deaf.

DICK. Nay, I'm none deaf.

TRAMP. It's coming nearer, nearer . . .
Trot-trot ! trot-trot ! Man, tell me that you hear it,
For God's sake, or I'll go mad !

DICK. No two men ever
May hear or see them, together, at one time.

TRAMP. Hear what ? See what ? Speak, man, if
you've a tongue !

DICK. The ghostly stirks.

TRAMP (*starting up*). The ghostly stirks ! Trot-trot !
Trot-trot ! They're almost on us. Look you ! There !
Along the road there, black against the sky.
They're charging down with eyes ablaze . . . O Christ . . .

[*He takes to his heels, running lamely down the road
on the Scottish side, as a herd of frightened
young stirks gallops down the road from the
English side. They pass DICK, who watches
them, placidly smoking, until they are by, when,
taking his pipe from his mouth, he gives a blood-
curdling whoop, which sends them scampering*

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

more wildly after the tramp. Presently the cattle-drover, panting and limping half-a-mile behind his herd, comes down the road. Seeing DICK, he stops.

DROVER. Have any beasts come by? Lord, what a dance

They've led me, since we quitted Bellingham!
I've chased them over half the countryside!

DICK. Ay: they were making straight for Dinlabyre.

DROVER. Then I can rest. They cannot go far wrong now.

We're for Saughtree; and I'm fair hattered, and they
Can't have the spunk left in them to stray far.
They'll be all right.

DICK. Ay! And your brother's with them.

DROVER. Brother? I have no brother . . .

DICK. Well, he and you

Are as like as peas—a pair of gallows-birds.

And he was driving them, and walloping them . . .

DROVER (*starting to run*). Good God! Just wait till
I catch up with him!

DICK (*calling after him*). It will take you all your
time, and more, to catch him.

[*To himself.*

Now I can sleep in peace, without bedfellows.

Two in a bed is one too many for me—

And such a clatter-jaw!

1913.

HOOPS

SCENE : *The big tent-stable of a travelling circus. On the ground near the entrance, GENTLEMAN JOHN, stable-man and general odd-job man, lies smoking beside MERRY ANDREW, the clown. GENTLEMAN JOHN is a little hunched man with a sensitive face and dreamy eyes. MERRY ANDREW, who is resting between the afternoon and evening performances, with his clown's hat lying beside him, wears a crimson wig, and a baggy suit of orange-coloured cotton, patterned with purple cats. His face is chalked dead-white and painted with a set grin, so that it is impossible to see what manner of man he is. In the background are camels and elephants feeding, dimly visible in the steamy dusk of the tent.*

GENTLEMAN JOHN. And then consider camels : only think

Of camels long enough, and you'd go mad—
With all their humps and lumps ; their knobbly knees,
Splay feet and straddle legs ; their sagging necks,
Flat flanks, and scraggy tails, and monstrous teeth.
I've not forgotten the first fiend I met :
'Twas in a lane in Smyrna, just a ditch

HOOPS

Between the shuttered houses, and so narrow
The brute's bulk blocked the road; the huge green
stack

Of dewy fodder that it slouched beneath
Brushing the yellow walls on either hand,
And shutting out the strip of burning blue :
And I'd to face that vicious bobbing head
With evil eyes, slack lips, and nightmare teeth,
And duck beneath the snaky, squirming neck,
Pranked with its silly string of bright blue beads,
That seemed to wriggle every way at once,
As though it were a hydra. Allah's beard !
But I was scared and nearly turned and ran :
I felt that muzzle take me by the scruff,
And heard those murderous teeth crunching my spine,
Before I stooped—though I dodged safely under.
I've always been afraid of ugliness.
I'm such a toad myself, I hate all toads ;
And the camel is the ugliest toad of all
To my mind : and it's just my devil's luck
I've come to this—to be a camel's lackey,
To fetch and carry for original sin,
For sure enough, the camel's old evil incarnate.
Blue beads and amulets to ward off evil !
No eye's more evil than a camel's eye.
The elephant is quite a comely brute,
Compared with Satan camel—trunk and all,
His floppy ears and his inconsequent tail.
He's stolid, but at least a gentleman.
It doesn't hurt my pride to valet him,

HOOPS

And bring his shaving-water. He's a lord.
Only the bluest blood that has come down
Through generations from the mastodon
Could carry off that tail with dignity,
That tail and trunk. He cannot look absurd,
For all the monkey tricks you put him through,
Your paper hoops and popguns. He just makes
His masters look ridiculous, when his pomp's
Butchered to make a bumpkin's holiday.
He's dignity itself, and proper pride,
That stands serenely in a circus-world
Of mountebanks and monkeys. He has weight
Behind him : aeons of primeval power
Have shaped that pillared bulk ; and he stands sure,
Solid, substantial on the world's foundations.
And he has form, form that's too big a thing
To be called beauty. Once, long since, I thought
To be a poet, and shape words, and mould
A poem like an elephant, huge, sublime,
To front oblivion : and because I failed,
And all my rhymes were gawky, shambling camels,
Or else obscene, blue-buttocked apes, I'm doomed
To lackey it for things such as I've made,
Till one of them crunches my back-bone with his teeth,
Or knocks my wind out with a forthright kick
Clean in the midriff, crumpling up in death
The hunched and stunted body that was me—
John, the apostle of the Perfect Form !
Jerusalem ! I'm talking, like a book—
As you would say : and a bad book at that,

HOOPS

A maundering, kiss-mammy book—The Hunchback's
End,

Or The Camel-Keeper's Reward—would be its title.

I froth and bubble like a new-broached cask.

No wonder you look glum, for all your grin.

What makes you mope? You've naught to growse
about.

You've got no hump. Your body's brave and straight—

So shapely even that you can afford

To trick it in fantastic shapelessness,

Knowing that there's a clean-limbed man beneath

Preposterous pantaloons and purple cats.

I would have been a poet, if I could :

But better than shaping poems 'twould have been

To have had a comely body and clean limbs

Obedient to my bidding.

MERRY ANDREW.

I missed a hoop

This afternoon.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. You missed a hoop? You
mean . . .

MERRY ANDREW. That I am done, used up, scrapped,
on the shelf,

Out of the running—only that, no more.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Well, I've been missing hoops
my whole life long ;

Though, when I come to think of it, perhaps

There's little consolation to be chewed

From crumbs that I can offer.

MERRY ANDREW.

I've not missed

A hoop since I was six. I'm forty-two.

HOOPS

This is the first time that my body's failed me :
But 'twill not be the last. And . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Such is life !

You're going to say. You see I've got it pat,
Your jaded wheeze. Lord, what a wit I'd make
If I'd a set grin painted on my face.
And such is life, I'd say a hundred times,
And each time set the world aroar afresh
At my original humour. Missed a hoop !
Why, man alive, you've naught to grumble at.
I've boggled every hoop since I was six.
I'm fifty-five ; and I've run round a ring
Would make this potty circus seem a pinhole.
I wasn't born to sawdust. I'd the world
For circus . . .

MERRY ANDREW. It's no time for crowing now.
I know a gentleman, and take on trust
The silver spoon and all. My teeth were cut
Upon a horseshoe: and I wasn't born
To purple and fine linen—but to sawdust,
To sawdust, as you say—brought up on sawdust.
I've had to make my daily bread of sawdust:
Ay, and my children's—children's, that's the rub,
As Shakespeare says . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Ah, there you go again !
What a rare wit to set the ring aroar—
As Shakespeare says ! Crowing ? A gentleman ?
Man, didn't you say you'd never missed a hoop ?
It's only gentlemen who miss no hoops,
Clean livers, easy lords of life who take

HOOPS

Each obstacle at a leap, who never fail.
You are the gentleman.

MERRY ANDREW. Now don't you try
Being funny at my expense ; or you'll soon find
I'm not quite done for yet—not quite snuffed out.
There's still a spark of life. You may have words :
But I've a fist will be a match for them.
Words slaver feebly from a broken jaw.
I've always lived straight, as a man must do
In my profession, if he'd keep in fettle :
But I'm no gentleman, for I fail to see
There's any sport in baiting a poor man
Because he's losing grip at forty-two,
And sees his livelihood slipping from his grasp—
Ay, and his children's bread.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Why, man alive,
Who's baiting you ? This winded, broken cur,
That limps through life, to bait a bull like you !
You don't want pity, man ! The beaten bull,
Even when the dogs are tearing at his gullet,
Turns no eye up for pity. I, myself,
Crippled and hunched and twisted as I am,
Would make a brave fend to stand up to you
Until you swallowed your words, if you should slobber
Your pity over me. A bull ! Nay, man,
You're nothing but a bear with a sore head.
A bee has stung you—you who've lived on honey.
Sawdust, forsooth ! You've had the sweet of life :
You've munched the honeycomb till . . .

MERRY ANDREW. Ay ! talk's cheap.

HOOPS

But you've no children. You don't understand.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. I have no children : I don't understand !

MERRY ANDREW. It's children make the difference.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Man alive—

Alive and kicking, though you're shamming dead—

You've hit the truth at last. It's that, just that,

Makes all the difference. If you hadn't children,

I'd find it in my heart to pity you,

Granted you'd let me. I don't understand !

I've seen you stripped. I've seen your children stripped.

You've never seen me naked ; but you can guess

The misstitched, gnarled, and crooked thing I am.

Now, do you understand ? I may have words :

But you, man, do you never burn with pride

That you've begotten those six limber bodies,

Firm flesh, and supple sinew, and lithe limb—

Six nimble lads, each like young Absalom,

With red blood running lively in his veins,

Bone of your bone, your very flesh and blood ?

It's you don't understand : God, what I'd give

This moment to be you, just as you are,

Preposterous pantaloons, and purple cats,

And painted leer, and crimson curls, and all—

To be you now, with only one missed hoop,

If I'd six clean-limbed children of my loins,

Born of the ecstasy of life within me,

To keep it quick and valiant in the ring

When I . . . but I . . . Man, man, you've missed a
hoop ;

HOOPS

But they'll take every hoop like blooded colts :
And 'twill be you in them that leaps through life,
And in their children, and their children's children.
God ! doesn't it make you hold your breath to think
There'll always be an Andrew in the ring,
The very spit and image of you stripped,
While life's old circus lasts ? And I . . . at least,
There is no twisted thing of my begetting
To keep my shame alive : and that's the most
That I've to pride myself upon. But, God,
I'm proud, ay, proud as Lucifer, of that.
Think what it means, with all the urge and sting,
When such a lust of life runs in the veins.
You, with your six sons, and your one missed hoop,
Put that thought in your pipe and smoke it. Well,
And how d'you like the flavour ? Something bitter ?
And burns the tongue a trifle ? That's the brand
That I must smoke while I've the breath to puff.

[*Pause.*

I've always worshipped the body, all my life—
The body, quick with the perfect health which is beauty,
Lively, lissom, alert, and taking its way
Through the world with the easy gait of the early gods.
The only moments I've lived my life to the full
And that live again in remembrance unfaded are those
When I've seen life compact in some perfect body,
The living God made manifest in man :
A diver in the Mediterranean, resting,
With sleeked black hair, and glistening salt-tanned skin,
Gripping the quivering gunwale with tense hands,

HOOPS

His torso lifted out of the peacock sea,
Like Neptune, carved in amber, come to life :
A stark Egyptian on the Nile's edge poised
Like a bronze Osiris against the lush, rank green :
A fisherman dancing reels, on New Year's Eve,
In a hall of shadowy rafters and flickering lights,
At St. Abbs on the Berwickshire Coast, to the skirl of
the pipes,
The lift of the wave in his heels, the sea in his veins :
A Cherokee Indian, as though he were one with his horse,
His coppery shoulders agleam, his feathers aflame
With the last of the sun, descending a gulch in Alaska :
A brawny Cleveland puddler, stripped to the loins,
On the cauldron's brink, stirring the molten iron
In the white-hot glow, a man of white-hot metal :
A Cornish ploughboy driving an easy share
Through the grey, light soil of a headland, against a sea
Of sapphire, gay in his new white corduroys,
Blue-eyed, dark-haired and whistling a careless tune :
Jack Johnson, stripped for the ring, in his swarthy pride
Of sleek and rippling muscle . . .

MERRY ANDREW.

Jack's the boy !

Ay, he's the proper figure of a man.
But he'll grow fat and flabby and scant of breath.
He'll miss his hoop some day.

GENTLEMAN JOHN.

But what are words

To shape the joy of form ? The Greeks did best
To cut in marble or to cast in bronze
Their ecstasy of living. I remember
A marvellous Hermes that I saw in Athens,

HOOPS

Fished from the very bottom of the deep
Where he had lain two thousand years or more,
Wrecked with a galley-full of Roman pirates,
Among the white bones of his plunderers
Whose flesh had fed the fishes as they sank—
Serene in cold imperishable beauty,
Biding his time, till he should rise again,
Exultant from the wave, for all men's worship,
The morning-spring of life, the youth of the world,
Shaped in sea-coloured bronze for everlasting.
Ay, the Greeks knew : but men have forgotten now.
Not easily do we meet beauty walking
The world to-day in all the body's pride.
That's why I'm here—a stable-boy to camels—
For in the circus-ring there's more delight
Of seemly bodies, goodly in sheer health,
Bodies trained and tuned to the perfect pitch,
Eager, blithe, debonair, from head to heel
Aglow and alive in every pulse, than elsewhere
In this machine-ridden land of grimy, glum,
Round-shouldered, coughing mechanics. Once I lived
In London in a slum called Paradise,
Sickened to see the greasy pavements crawling
With puny, flabby babies, thick as maggots.
Poor brats! I'd soon go mad, if I'd to live
In London, with its stunted men and women
But little better to look on than myself.

Yet, there's an island where the men keep fit—
St. Kilda's, a stark fastness of high crag :

HOOPS

They must keep fit or famish : their main food
The Solan goose ; and it's a chancy job
To swing down a sheer face of slippery granite
And drop a noose over the sentinel bird
Ere he can squawk to rouse the sleeping flock.
They must keep fit—their bodies taut and trim—
To have the nerve : and they're like tempered steel,
Suppled and fined. But even they've grown slacker
Through traffic with the mainland, in these days.
A hundred years ago, the custom held
That none should take a wife till he had stood,
His left heel on the dizziest point of crag,
His right leg and both arms stretched in mid air,
Above the sea : three hundred feet to drop
To death, if he should fail—a Spartan test.
But any man who could have failed, would scarce
Have earned his livelihood, or his children's bread
On that bleak rock.

MERRY ANDREW (*drowsily*). Ay, children—that's it,
children !

GENTLEMAN JOHN. St. Kilda's children had a chance
at least,

With none begotten idly of weakling fathers.
A Spartan test for fatherhood ! Should they miss
Their hoop, 'twas death, and childless. You have still
Six lives to take unending hoops for you,
And you yourself are not done yet . . .

MERRY ANDREW (*more drowsily*). Not yet.
And there's much comfort in the thought of children.
They're bonnie boys enough ; and should do well,

HOOPS

If I can but keep going a little while,
A little longer till . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Six strapping sons !
And I have naught but camels. [*Pause.*]

Yet, I've seen

A vision in this stable that puts to shame
Each ecstasy of mortal flesh and blood
That's been my eyes' delight. I never breathed
A word of it to man or woman yet :
I couldn't whisper it now to you, if you looked
Like any human thing this side of death.
'Twas on the night I stumbled on the circus.
I'd wandered all day, lost among the fells,
Over snow-smothered hills, through blinding blizzard,
Whipped by a wind that seemed to strip and skin me,
Till I was one numb ache of sodden ice.
Quite done, and drunk with cold, I'd soon have dropped
Dead in a ditch ; when suddenly a lantern
Dazzled my eyes. I smelt a queer warm smell ;
And felt a hot puff in my face ; and blundered
Out of the flurry of snow and raking wind
Dizzily into a glowing Arabian night
Of elephants and camels having supper.
I thought that I'd gone mad, stark, staring mad,
But I was much too sleepy to mind just then—
Dropped dead asleep upon a truss of hay ;
And lay, a log, till—well, I cannot tell
How long I lay unconscious. I but know
I slept, and wakened, and that 'twas no dream.
I heard a rustle in the hay beside me,

HOOPS

And opening sleepy eyes, scarce marvelling,
I saw her, standing naked in the lamplight,
Beneath the huge tent's cavernous canopy,
Against the throng of elephants and camels
That champed unwondering in the golden dusk,
Moon-white Diana, mettled Artemis—
Her body, quick and tense as her own bowstring,
Her spirit, an arrow barbed and strung for flight—
White snowflakes melting on her night-black hair,
And on her glistening breasts and supple thighs :
Her red lips parted, her keen eyes alive
With fierce, far-ranging hungers of the chase
Over the hills of morn . . . The lantern guttered
And I was left alone in the outer darkness
Among the champing elephants and camels.
And I'll be a camel-keeper to the end ;
Though never again my eyes . . .

[*Pause.*

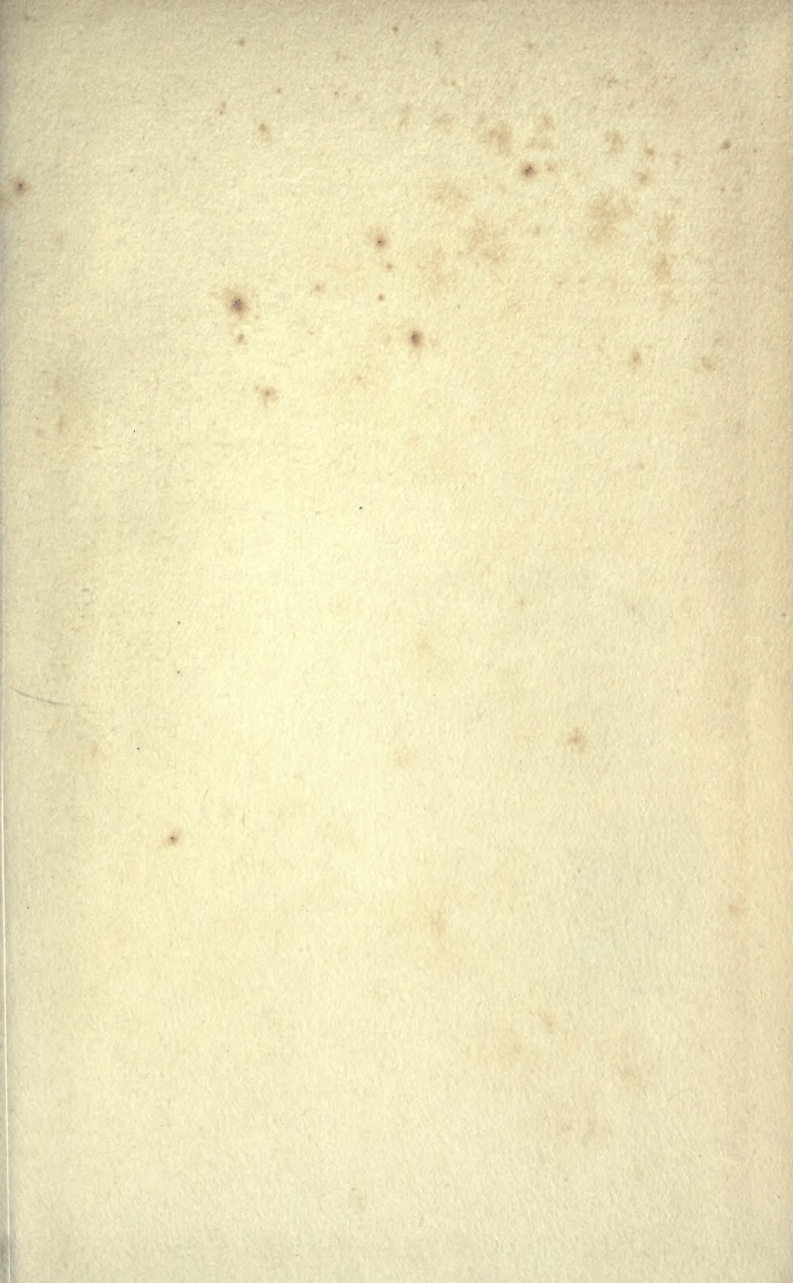
So, you can sleep,
You Merry Andrew, for all you missed your hoop.
It's just as well perhaps. Now I can hold
My secret to the end. Ah, here they come !

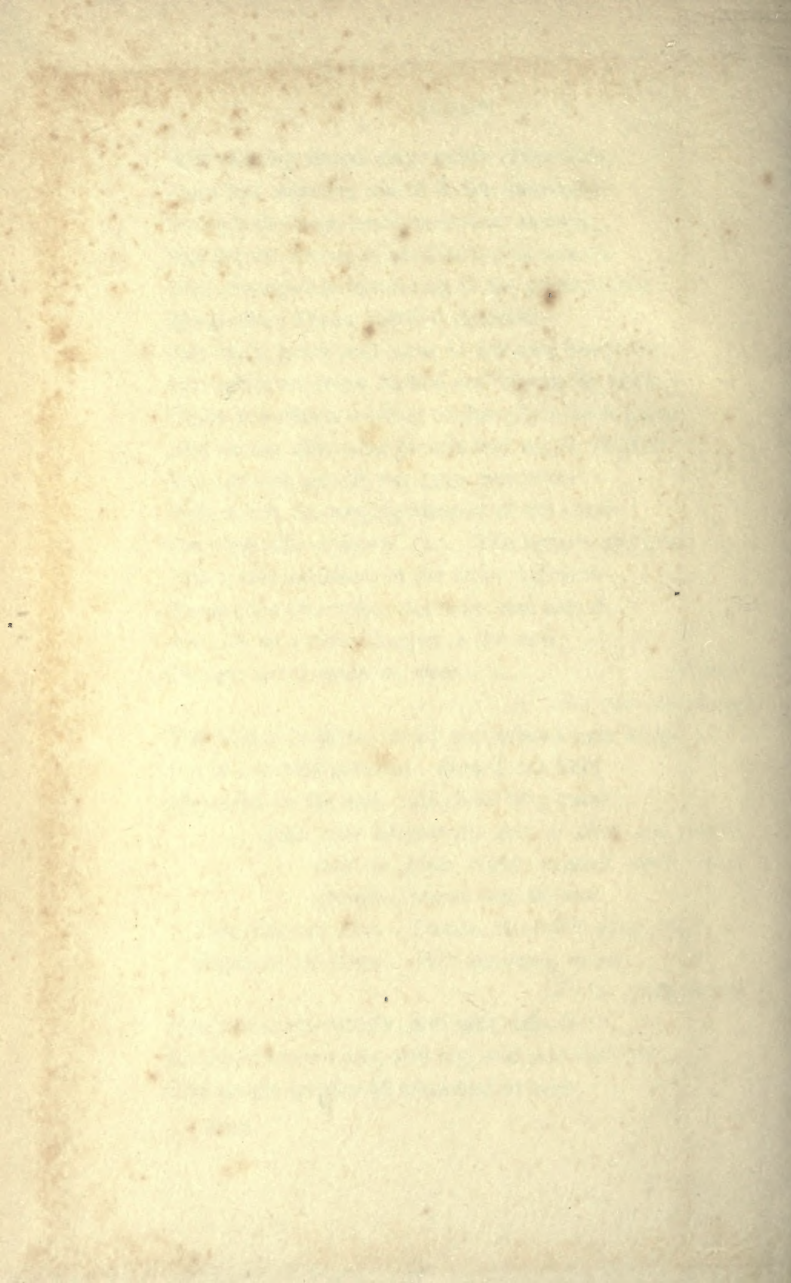
[*Six lads between the ages of three and twelve,
clad in pink tights covered with silver
spangles, tumble into the tent.*

THE ELDEST BOY. Daddy, the bell's rung, and . . .
GENTLEMAN JOHN. He's snoozing sound.

[*To the youngest boy.*

You just creep quietly, and take tight hold
Of the crimson curls, and tug, and you will hear
The purple pussies all caterwaul at once.





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